

May 14, 2004: Saudi Arabia: GAO study announced

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WASHINGTON - U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Chair Michael K. Young, together with the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee and the House Government Reform Committee, announced yesterday that the General Accounting office (GAO) will undertake a comprehensive review of U.S. oversight of Saudi support for an ideology promoting violence and intolerance globally. In conducting the study, the GAO will seek information from relevant U.S. government agencies and will consult with outside experts on Saudi promotion of religious extremism, including the USCIRF. In May 2003, the USCIRF issued a report on Saudi Arabia that included a key recommendation that Congress initiate and make public a study on Saudi exportation of intolerance. The findings of the study will be presented in a public report, although some of the information obtained may be classified. "I am pleased to announce today that the Commission's recommendation has taken a major step forward in being implemented. We would like to thank a bipartisan and bicameral group of Members of Congress for taking the initiative to make this happen," said Young. "This GAO study will not only help shed light on what the U.S. government has found in terms of the role of the Saudis in spreading hate and intolerance, but also will identify what the U.S. government is doing the address the issue. What the Commission seeks are facts, whether they vindicate or implicate Saudi Arabia." "Although Saudi Arabia has recently initiated some reforms, reports indicate that some Saudi schools and mosques continue to teach hatred or preach violence," said Senator Susan M. Collins (R-ME). "Until the Saudis truly reform their schools and culture and foster freedom, equality, and justice, Saudi Arabia will continue to produce more Osama Bin Ladens. The GAO investigation that we have initiated should give us a clearer picture of how far Saudi Arabia has come with its reforms - or how much further it still needs to go." Other recent developments in Russia contribute to concerns about the influence of authoritarian strains within the Russian government and growing societal intolerance. In June, three people who organized or took part in an art exhibit at Moscow's Sakharov Foundation that was critical of the political and commercial role of the Russian Orthodox Church were criminally charged with "inciting religious hatred." Also in June, Nikolai Girenko, a noted Russian activist against racism and religious extremism, was murdered on his doorstep in St. Petersburg. A Russian extremist nationalist group claimed responsibility, saying it had "sentenced" Girenko to death for combating religious, ethnic and sexual-orientation-based intolerance. "Serious questions have been raised about the Saudi government and members of the royal family supporting the proliferation of extremism abroad. This GAO study will help Congress assess the extent of this problem and what measures need to be taken to combat the alarming rise of extremism in Muslim communities around the world," said Congressman Henry A. Waxman (D-CA). The text of the letter is below: April 23, 2004 The Honorable David M. Walker Comptroller General of the United States U.S. General Accounting Office 441 G Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20548 Dear Mr. Walker: A critical component in the war on terrorism is the effort to identify and combat the sources of ideology that advocate violence and intolerance which promotes hatred and helps recruit future terrorists. Unfortunately, there have been many reports identifying Saudi Arabia as a significant source and supporter of such ideology. For Example, in May 2003, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom issued a report indicating that it had received "numerous credible reports that the Saudi government and members of the royal family directly and indirectly fund the global propagation of an exclusivist religious ideology, Wahhabism, which allegedly promotes hatred, intolerance, and other abuses of human rights, including violence." Given the impact of these activities on U.S. interests, it is vital that the U.S. government demonstrate that effective programs and policies are in place to monitor and counter the spread of this ideology. Therefore, we request that the GAO seek information from the relevant agencies, and consult with outside experts on the promotion of religious extremism, including the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, to answer the following questions. While some of the information obtained by GAO may be classified, I would like GAO to present as much of its findings as possible in a public report. What does the U.S. government, including the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom (OIRF), currently do to identify and monitor any sources of Saudi funding and support for individuals, organizations, and institutions that advocate violence and intolerance and the promotion of this extremism outside of Saudi Arabia? Are these activities coordinated with each other? Are they a priority within their agency? What does the U.S. government, including the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, do to counter the influence of Saudi promotion of ideology that advocates violence and intolerance globally? What programs does the U.S. fund for this effort, including programs that promote democracy and human rights, including freedom of religion, and conflict mitigation in various countries (e.g. Nigeria, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) where credible reports have identified Saudi financing of individuals, organizations, and institutions that advocate violence and intolerance? What findings have emerged from U.S. government efforts to identify, monitor, and counter the Saudi sources responsible for financing and promoting ideology that advocates violence and intolerance globally? Do the State Department International Religious Freedom Report, State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, and State Department Patterns of Global Terrorism Report adequately identify the role of Saudi Arabian sources in the promotion of such extremism outside of Saudi Arabia? We appreciate your cooperation with this request. Please keep us informed as you develop your work on this project. Sincerely,

Susan M. Collins

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